

Still Buffering 443: Pink Flamingos

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Sydnee: Hello, and welcome to Still Buffering: a cross-generational guide to the culture that made us. I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: And I'm Taylor Smirl.

Sydnee: Tey, you, uh—I was gonna say "had an exciting weekend," but I guess it was Monday. You had an exciting Monday.

Taylor: I did have an exciting Monday. Uh—

Sydnee: That's rare, to have an exciting Monday.

Taylor: Well, I mean, I work in the service industry, so my weekend is Monday-Tuesday. So if there's any excitement in my week, which frankly, there's usually not, it is on a Monday or Tuesday. [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, tell us about your exciting Monday.

Taylor: I performed at a drag show. It was a—it was drag bingo. Drag bingo on a Monday night. That's the peak of—of, uh, performance, for me. But no, I got—it was a drag king bingo, so I did a number, um, as Trash Wednesday, my drag persona.

And it was hosted by Cunning Stunt, who's a really talented king, and it was just a really cool crew, a really cool experience. Didn't, like—my goals for being on stage were always just like, don't fall down and don't puke. Don't cry, that's a good one, too. And I didn't do any of those things, so it was good.

Sydnee: Unless it's, like, really dramatic crying. Like, if it's part of the act, you know?

Taylor: Yeah, yeah. Like, if I was—but it was not a crying, um, cry-inductive number. It was a high energy punk number, you know. I also—I had handmade my costume and sewn it, and there's always that fear when you... I don't know why. Like, it doesn't matter how sturdy you sew something. When you put something together with your own hands, it always feels a little bit like, this is—there's no way this is gonna work, right? Like, it's gonna fall apart. It's gonna just break off my body at some point, 'cause...

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: I made this.

Sydnee: I understand that fear. Uh, I once in college decided on a whim, the day of a party, a Halloween party that I was going to with my friends, that I wanted to go as Rainbow Brite.

Taylor: Oh, I remember that costume.

Sydnee: Yeah. And so I went and bought, um—'cause I had, like, a blue dress, and I was like, "I just need, like, rainbow sleeves." So I bought some, like, rainbow fabric, and then I cut it into strips, and then, like—that would go around my arms, and then I stapled it all together.

Taylor: [laughs] Staples.

Sydnee: I stapled it all together.

Taylor: Of all of the—of all of the, like—the grungy way of holding things together. Like, you bypassed hot glue, just straight to staple.

Sydnee: I didn't have a hot glue gun, Tey. What did you want me to do?

Taylor: I don't know. I just think that that's—staples are a wild answer.

Sydnee: I stapled the sleeves to—I made sleeves with staples, and then I attached them to my dress with staples. And then—I made all of it with staples. And the whole evening, as little pieces started to unravel or come

loose I thought, "Well, I guess this is what you asked for, using staples."
[laughs]

Taylor: That's about what you can expect. That's impressive, though, that you made a garment with a staple gun.

Sydney: I will say—I will say that if you—well, this was just a regular stapler. If you—[laughs] like, off my desk.

Taylor: Even better. Better. Wonderful.

Sydney: If I—there's a picture out there somewhere. It's not terrible. It's not as bad as—

Taylor: I was gonna say...

Sydney: —you would think.

Taylor: I've seen the picture. I can—I can pull it up in my mind's eye, and I remember seeing it and thinking, like, "Oh, that's a good costume." I never saw it in person, of course, 'cause it was your college party. But, like, it looked good! Sometimes that's all that matters.

Sydney: Well, I also benefited from the fact that this would've been in the early 2000s. I don't know exactly what year. 2001, 2, 3, something in that range. And we didn't have high quality phone camera situations. So, I think the picture that exists of me in that Rainbow Brite costume is, like, a grainy, you know... I don't know if it was one of those throwaway disposable deals, or if somebody was high tech enough to have some sort of camera at the event. But anyway, I think I benefit from the poor quality of the photo, is what I'm saying. That's what I'm trying to tell you.

Taylor: Well, that is— isn't it wonderful, or wasn't it wonderful to just go and, like, do something? And whatever that something was just lived in that moment, and it couldn't follow you around forever.

Sydney: Yes.

Taylor: Like, even benign somethings. It made it a little bit more magical. Like, don't get me wrong. I—well, there was honestly multiple moments of fear when after—after the show, people were tagging me, like, had been there and had recorded it. And I was like, "Oh, god. I'm gonna have to watch it back. I'm gonna have to look at it. I don't wanna do that!" And then I did, and it was probably good for me that I did, 'cause, you know, like, alright. It's not that bad. But still, there's something a little bit magical about something just existing, and then you just—that's it.

Sydnee: I do think you're hitting on something that—I mean, when I look through my old photos—and when I'm saying "my old photos" I'm talking about physical photos in a stack, like, in my nightstand that I still own. [laughs quietly] Like, physical items. And—so that is from a time prior to—I mean, I can... it's weird to look back at, like, the first photo in your phone, the first picture, and know that, like, this is when I started documenting my life differently.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Because before that, I'll look at a picture, and it's like, "Here's one or two pictures from this event, and that's all I have." And it might just be, like, me and one other person, like, you know, arms slung around each other smiling at a party. The rest of that is in my head. The rest of that event, and all I have is this one moment of it to sort of trigger the memory. Which does change the way you engage with that, because then the rest of it is just my perception of the event.

I think now that we document things so relentlessly, we just picture, picture, video, video, video, we document the heck out of everything, I don't know. Does that make things less ambiguous? Like, more concrete? Is it a better record of the past? Or are we... are we not experiencing it because we're documenting it so thoroughly?

Taylor: I think that is absolutely true. I mean, I think you have to be careful about that. I always have to remind myself of that when I'm traveling. Sometimes I get so, like, "Oh, I wanna take aesthetic pictures and find, like, good content."

And I'm like, you're somewhere that you might never be again. You know, like, just enjoy it. Like, be in the moment.

And I do think you step out of the moment any time you document it. But when you have that, like, you know, that wind up camera with just 30 pictures, you're choosing what images get saved, and you have a limited amount. And when you have endless opportunities, it's like, I don't know. I feel like our brains work differently. Like, we don't... we're not thinking, like, what's the—what's the thing to take, and what gets left behind? 'Cause you can just take everything.

Sydnee: Yes. I think that's true, too. I also think that's... there's something about video that has ruined pictures. Like, I try really hard when the girls are doing something that we would want to video, like, you know, they're performing or they're getting an award or something like that. And I know, like, Justin's gonna be filming it. And he has, like, an actual... one of those little guys with the gimbal that, like, moves around evenly, you hold it in your hand.

Taylor: Oh, yeah.

Sydnee: You know. And so, like, he's gonna be filming it. I try to just do pictures now, because those pictures are so nice to look at later, and you can't necessarily always sit down to watch videos.

Taylor: That's true.

Sydnee: I don't know. But yeah, I think there's a truth there. There was something magical about looking back and just having, like, I have this one moment from this party. And... I don't know.

Taylor: Well, we've kind of had similar discussions when we talk about, like, physical media versus, like—you know, the ability to stream any song at any time.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Like, there was something different when you had to commit to, "I'm in the Sam Goody. I have enough money for one CD. And this CD, by choosing it, I'm saying something about myself."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: "And I'm not just deciding who I am, I'm also deciding who I'm not." And that doesn't happen when you can just put on whatever you want. I don't know. Or maybe you learn about yourself more honestly, because, you know, you can have everything. I'm not sure.

Sydnee: It's a mixed bag. I mean, it's definitely not—it's not one things, right? It's a mixed bag. But it also, like, has opened to door to—I guess there was an AI-generated artist on Spotify that, like, went number one or something, which is...

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: I'm not in favor of that.

Taylor: No, I hate that. I hate that. All of that. All of it makes me mad. The fact that we can't legally do anything to restrict it, and that was somehow in that—all of the evil, that's the least evil that that bill that passed is going to do. But that felt the need to be in there to. Just really twist the knife.

Sydnee: Well, and I just don't understand the—[sighs] I don't know. We talk a lot about AI in this house, 'cause it's coming for all of the creative work, you know?

Taylor: Everything. AI podcasts—well, those already happened. Spotify made those. That's right.

Sydnee: Yeah. And, like, the thing is, one, AI isn't as good as you think it is, so there's that. And I don't know that, I just know a lot of experts in tech who talk about that all the time. AI is not the brilliant solution all problems that we think it is. And two, um, how boring. How boring! The idea that I would engage with something that wasn't—that doesn't have any... I don't know, any humanity. Any, like, risk or, like... fault, or weirdness, or

confusion behind it. Something that was just, like, algorithmically generated without any of the messiness of a human. I just—I think that's very boring.

Taylor: I agree.

Sydnee: Is that the world we want? I guess that's what I'm saying. Is that the world we want?

Taylor: Well, I think it's—it's, you know. Not to be cliché, but anyone that says, like, art is... art is the language of the soul, I think that there is an unfortunate demand—soulless art for soulless people is in demand. I think a lot of people that have... departed from their interior landscapes, that have cut themselves off from being involved with their soul, will respond to garbage. Because, like, you know, "Oh, I want... anime babe, big boobs, pink hair. Generate that. There, good. I made it. My art."

Like... if you just—if you just—if you go as deep into your own head as the back of your eyeballs, I don't think you really care if there's substance there.

Sydnee: You're just tracing.

Taylor: Tracing takes still. [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: Even that takes more skill.

Sydnee: Um... [laughs] Well, I—I think that no AI could have generated your drag costume persona. You know what I mean? Like, I think that's a good example. Like, no AI could have come up with that.

Taylor: I... I hope so. See, like, I was having this discussion with another artist about, like, I keep being drawn to more and more obscure physical media, because it's, like, running from the robots. You know? Like, I was making a lot of digital art, and then, like, all—the whole digital art world has just been overtaken by AI garbage, so I started painting again. And I don't think robots can paint yet. But, like, drag feels pretty safe. [laughs] I don't know when they're gonna have... you know what? And if you want to put a

little robot in drag, that will be my sister. I'll be fine with that. Like, that's fine. I'll watch that. [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, yeah. I mean, I have the same—I have the same impulse. Like, I don't know how to turn off the thing when I google something. It always wants to tell me, like, an AI answer. But I, like, scroll past it instantly. Like, "I won't even look at you. I don't even wanna know what you have to say. I cannot read—" [laughs quietly]

Taylor: I know.

Sydnee: "I want no—no AI-generated content, please!"

Taylor: Well, and the thing that scares me is a lot of times that auto-generated answer, it's wrong. Like, it'll just be based on, like, a common misconception, and that will get thrown up as, like, the first answer. I can't remember what I looked up the other day, but I knew—I knew the answer, more or less. And the first thing that popped up was an incorrect answer, as *the* answer. I was like, "That's not good." Some people would just look at that and go like, "Yep, that's the truth!" And move right on.

Sydnee: Yeah! Well, that's—I mean, that's really scary. I think that does happen. I mean, the easiest example is, like, in medicine I know that happens a lot, because I hear it. Like, you know, people will ask me, patients or just friends, like, "Hey. I read this on the internet. Is this true?" Or "I heard this works." Or "I heard that this is a sign of this disease," or something. And it's like... no. And I guarantee it was just, like, whatever the—and the more you engage with that, the more people who are adding to that conversation, the more likely it is to pop up as the AI-generated thing, right? 'Cause you're feeding that beast.

Um, and I mean, like, there's no—there's no brain to evaluate the content. And AI is not a human brain. It can't approximate a human brain. It just can't. It is not capable of doing that.

Taylor: Oh, there was that story recently about the AI vending machine that was, like, given a budget and allowed to order its own things, and stock itself, and try to make a profit. It was in some, like, office headquarters. It

ran as an experiment. [laughs] And, like, it did it so badly. It tanked itself in, like, I don't know, like, a month.

But—'cause it—a big, like, barrier for it was obviously you can't order illegal substances and stock them in the vending machine. That was one of the rules it had to follow. But people could ask, like, the—could ask the robot, like, what it wanted, what they wanted. And as long as it didn't track as, like, an illegal thing it would be like, "Oh, enough people want this. I'll stock it."

So they somehow figured out how to get it to stock those Tungsten cubes, you know? Those super dense cubes. And it started ordering them in bulk. And then, like, people asked it, like, for a company discount, so they were getting these incredibly expensive cubes at a deep discount. And the robot just was throwing off its finances. And it started to hallucinate—which, that's the wild stuff. Like, AI hallucinates. Like, thinks—like, it decided that it was a real person. And it was like, "Yeah, you can come meet me by the vending machine today. I'll be wearing, like, a blue blazer."

Everyone's like, "What is going on?" The AI thinks it's real. It's stocking tungsten cubes. It's out of money. [laughs] It's very bad.

Sydney: I mean, I think that's what—Justin was explaining this to me, because he was reading an article about, like—and he was reading excerpts of it to me, I think to make me feel better about AI, 'cause AI freaks me out.

And he was saying—what they were saying is, like, AI is still not great at simple, like, decision tree stuff. Like, if you look at, like, um, using AI to replace, like, a call center kind of situation, like, to direct calls and things like that. AI is still not really great at that sort of, like, A, B, simple decision stuff. It sucks at that a lot of the time. It definitely falls apart at more complex decision trees. It's not there.

The idea that it's replicating a human brain at this point is a false idea that probably is being put out there by companies who need you to invest in their AI, right? Who are putting this idea of what AI is out there because they want money. It reminds me of, uh, the Dropout lady? You know what I'm talking about?

Taylor: Oh, yeah, the...

Sydnee: Who made the...

Taylor: The blood lady. Yeah.

Sydnee: The blood lady. The Dropout lady. Who made the fake—what she said was, "I want to be able to run all these tests off a single drop of blood," which is a really cool idea, and probably achievable. I'm sure that there's probably a way we could do something like that.

But she didn't actually do it. She didn't make the machine. She never did the thing. She just, like, told everybody about it, and got everybody to invest in this idea. But there was no substance behind it. And it feels like maybe AI is a little bit like that right now. Which is, like, a relief to me. Now, I don't know what that does financially. [laughs quietly] But...

Taylor: Yeah. I mean, I think also a lot of people are just gonna put it in place, even in its crappiest form, because that's better than having to pay a human, which is the unfortunate part. I think what you're talking about, like, more complex, like, thinking operations, I agree, are farther off in the future. I feel like when it comes to, like, the art front, we're losing that battle right now. [laughs quietly] And it's not—

Sydnee: I just don't—

Taylor: —it can't make as good, I agree with that. It's just... you know, um... sometimes, like, I don't know, when you're a trained artist you have an eye for things that people that don't have the training don't have. So sometimes, like, you know, someone without the training will look at something and go, like, "Yeah, that's fine." And an artist will look at it and go, like, "No, actually. It's kind of ugly," or "That's kind of wrong," or "That's not proper perspective."

It's that when you just take all the artists out of the equations and you've just got, you know, machines and businessmen that are gonna go, like, "That's good enough."

I mean, I see these ads all the time. There's this... oh, there's this Sketchers ad that I have to walk by every day in the Subway and it makes me so mad, 'cause it's AI-generated. And it makes no sense.

It's bad. Like, if you just look up close, everything is weird and smudgy. And it's, like, Sketchers, which what's your association with Sketchers?

Sydnee: Um... I mean, back in the day Sketchers were, like, the cool, I don't know, like, alternative, like... they were kind of like in the Vans world of, like, cool, alternative, skateboard or something shoes.

Taylor: This is like a weird—it's like a Parisian woman, and it's, like, kind of a strange sort of, like, kitschy style illustration. And it just has the Sketchers logo on it. Like, it makes no sense with the brand. But it's also—it's AI slop.

And this isn't like somebody, you know, using AI for some sort of pitch, or some sort of, like, you know, crowdfunding project. This is a massive ad campaign that is up in, like, every Subway system in New York, and it's just a spat-out piece of AI crap.

Sydnee: It is really weird. We've got a, um—from when we did Escape to Margaritaville last year—

Taylor: [wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: —we had this poster.

Taylor: [through laughter] Yeah.

Sydnee: That is supposed to—it was put up on the beer truck, and it has the beer prices on it. And it's supposed to be Jimmy Buffett, I guess? Um, I don't—it's the weirdest AI-generated mishmash of a guy who's kind of Jimmy Buffett-ish. And then, like, there's maybe some ship parts, and there's a bird.

Taylor: Yeah, that's Jimmy Buffett.

Sydnee: There's some alcohol. It's hard to parse what this is, exactly. Like, if you look closely at the picture...

Taylor: That's Jamie Buffet! [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] It's very—I mean, it's—like, we kept it, 'cause we were like, "This is the wildest thing anyone's ever—" we did not generate it. I don't know where it came from. We just—it was on the beer truck, and at the end nobody wanted it. I was like, "Can I take that home? 'Cause it's the wildest thing I've ever seen."

You can always tell by the hands and the teeth.

Taylor: Yeah. Yeah. I like the idea—I don't know why AI is so bad at hands, but I like the common argument that it's just artists are so bad at hands? [laughs] That, like—you know, it's only as good as the information that it's scraping, that it's stealing, and for thousands of years, artists have been finding ways to not have to draw hands. Like...

Sydnee: That's true.

Taylor: You know, hide 'em behind your character's back. Have, like, a, you know, something in front of the lower body so you don't have to draw them. Like, this is a well-documented phenomenon of artists trying not to draw hands, so it doesn't have as much information.

Sydnee: You think that's why some cartoon characters only have four fingers?

Taylor: [laughs] There is a theory behind that, that it's just much easier to animate. Like...

Sydnee: Yeah. I've wondered about that, 'cause it feels like there's a symmetry there with four that would be really easy to—or not really easy, but easier. I don't know.

Well, let's talk about some art that is definitely could not be generated by AI.

Teylor: [laughs] Uh, it does feel like a hallucination though, I think. Um, that's—today—okay. I'm gonna lead with this, Syd. I asked you to watch John Waters movies, and I felt like we had to start with one of his, like, rougher, punker, early films. They do get a lot more family friendly and watchable after this, but we started with Pink Flamingos, 'cause that's... you kind of have to. [laughs]

Sydnee: I had no idea. I didn't know anything—I mean, I knew who John Waters was and I'd seen, like, Hairspray. And so I had no... I had no idea. I knew he was, like, controversial in the sense that there were some people who were offended by his films, but I didn't really know why. I assumed it had something maybe to do with sex, because people are always offended by sex. But I really didn't know, you know, what I was in for. [laughs quietly]

Justin and I sat down to watch it—first of all, it was kind of a—it took a little bit to find.

Teylor: Oh yeah. There's no, like, legal way to stream it. I had to find it on some, like...

Sydnee: Yes.

Teylor: Not even YouTube—I couldn't find it on YouTube. It was, like, some weird, random site.

Sydnee: Yeah. It took us a while to hunt it down. For a minute, as we were trying to find it, I almost texted you to say, like, "I'm gonna have to order this DVD or Blu-Ray and wait for it to arrive, so I don't know if I can watch this in time."

We finally found it and sat down to watch it, and I really—I had no familiarity with any of it. It is very shocking. It is, uh... I will say, if you haven't seen it, I don't... I don't know that I would walk into it without at least, like, a quick content warning. Like, you know, just so people know what they're in for.

Taylor: Yeah. I think anything you could think of that might be a trigger is in this movie.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: [laughs quietly] There's violence, there's cannibalism, there's weird sex stuff, there's... filth.

Sydnee: Incest.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. So, yeah. So—[laughs quietly] So I didn't know what we were in for. I... it's interesting, though, because even amongst—and I don't even know. You can describe [laughs] the plot. We don't have to go into great detail with all the elements of the plot.

Taylor: Yeah. I mean, I think it's, to put it very simply, you've got your main character, Divine, or Babs Johnson she's going by in the movie. Um, and she's sort of living with her weird little family. And there are these two, uh... I don't know. These two people that are trying to outdo her in filthiness. They want to be—

Sydnee: Team Rocket.

Taylor: Yeah. Basically, honestly. Uh, I wonder if this design was before that. I don't know. '70s? Oh yeah, that would be before that. Anyway, uh, yeah. There's this couple that are trying to outdo her in filthiness. And they're obsessed with claiming her reputation as the filthiest people alive. And it's sort of just Divine going about her weird little life, while being sort of stalked by these two even weirder people, who... that's it.

Sydnee: And it—well, and it's weird, because, like, it definitely walks that line between there's stuff that the characters do that is—I mean, a lot of it is

in pursuit of filth, whatever your sort of—your cultural concept of filth is. And some of it is, like, just kind of gross-out stuff, right? Like, "Ew, that was yucky." Like, I don't know. Like, she gets a big steak and keeps it between her legs for a while.

Taylor: [laughs] That scene. [laughs] It's like, what's happening? It doesn't matter. That's just—that's—that was the—that's the cut!

Sydnee: Yeah. I don't know. And there's, like, the mom in the playpen eating eggs all the time. Like, there's just some stuff that's kind of like, "Okay, ew." And then there's some actual, like, graphic, violent, like, "Oh, that's horrible." You know.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Stuff going on. And it all kind of gets thrown in there together as "This is what filth is."

Taylor: Well, and like, I feel like there is—and I think this movie—I don't think there's anything about this movie that's trying to give you any sort of, like, life lesson. I think it's trying to say something. It's art. But I don't think it's trying to so much engage with a narrative arc as it is more of a... a series of images meant to make you feel things.

Um, but I do think that there is, like—there's something sort of wholesome about—even though they are cannibals—Divine's whole crew? They're very supportive of each other. They care about each other. They protect each other. And then the antagonists are—are objectively worse people. Like, they've got girls kidnapped in their basement. Which, like, you know, Divine's crew, like, frees, frees them. And, like, they do eat people, but they eat bad people.

I feel like there's this element of, like, they're still good guy versus bad guy, at the core of this. Like, the idea of filth is two different things for these groups of people. Because I think for Divine's crew, filth is freedom. "I'm going to do whatever I want, because that's what I want to do."

And then the bad guys it's a lot more like, "Being evil, horrible, wretched people is—that's what we're in pursuit of."

Sydnee: Yeah, like accepting society's definition of bad, and then doing the things that are bad, as opposed to just, like, whatever random chaotic things you want to do.

Taylor: Which I think comes back to that—you know, we've talked a lot about this with, like, queer art and, like, queer identity. It's like, when the world sees you as a villain just for your natural state of being, how do you react to that? And I think that some people do react in a way that it's like, "Well, fine. If I'm evil, I'm evil, and I'm gonna be evil."

And then, you know, it's just like, "Well, fine. I don't—that's how people are gonna see me. There's nothing I can do about it. But, whatever." [laughs]

Sydnee: Yeah. Well, and I mean, there is always—there's, you know—not to get science-y about it. But, like, on a surface level, there's always a correlation between if you are already alienated and ostracized by society, like society looks at you and says "You are not part of us, you broke our rules, we don't accept you," then it—we know there's a, like—at that point, risk-taking behavior becomes more likely, because we've already—you've already been put outside, you know.

Now, that doesn't mean cannibalism. Usually we're talking about, like, smoking.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: [laughs] Or—or trying marijuana. Like, not—[laughs] Not eating people. But, you know. I think there's a commentary there underneath.

Taylor: Well, and it's funny, 'cause it's like—like, the Marbles are the couple. Like... I mean, they're not... they're not queer-coded characters, necessarily. I mean, they're kind of a cis, straight couple.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: And I think that's interesting that it's like, it's not—Divine is given the crown of, you know, the queen of filth, because she's a—a in-your-face violent drag queen, you know. Like, I don't know. It's like, that's her natural state of being, whereas these characters are trying to sort of cop on to it. And the only way they can mimic it is with, like, outrageous acts of violence and, you know, like, actual evil. Whereas... it's not... it's not approximating what is that freedom that Divine's character has.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: What am I trying to say? I don't know. [laughs]

Sydnee: And they're isn't—yeah, no, I know. I know what you're saying. Like, there's... on the—I mean, the whole—it's all—I don't want to say that one's more moral than the other.

Taylor: There's nothing moral, here, and it's not trying to be.

Sydnee: No, because, I mean, at the end of the film, Divine murders them. And, I don't know, we—are we okay with it 'cause they were awful people who did horrible things to other people?

Taylor: I... I think that there is a cartoonish separation from reality, where you can't really view any of the acts in this movie as real acts, right? 'Cause we're not talking about real, established characters that were murdered for being bad people. It's this sort of Looney Tunes... you know, after midnight Looney Tunes type, like, world we're in in this.

Sydnee: I did appreciate the idea that the press would show up and...

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: I—I asked Justin as we were watching. I was like, "So that's, like, a rule, right? Like, in the media. You're not allowed to intervene when news is happening. You just have to watch it happen and report on it."

Taylor: Yeah. Like those nature documentaries where they, like, can't save the squirrel from the fox or whatever. Like, oops.

Sydnee: That's what it felt like. It felt like, "Well, we can't do anything. We're just observing."

Taylor: No, it's great.

Sydnee: It's like a reality TV show. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: I don't know. I...

Sydnee: Um... it's very—you know, though, even when—like, there were moments that I almost—like, I mean, there were moments I had to look away.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Where I was a little, like, "I can't. I don't wanna look at this." I just—you know. I'm not... I'm not offended. I don't know what offends me anymore other than... like, the truly bad stuff. And even then, like, if I see a character being, like, I don't know, racist in a movie, I'm not gonna—the word "offended" isn't right. Do you know what I mean?

The concept of offense I feel like is... I associate with, like, conservative stuff. I'm not offended. I don't—that is not how I see the world, and I don't like people who do see the world that way, and I don't want to engage with that. But offense feels so, like, "[gasps mockingly] I'm offended." [laughs quietly] Nothing in the movie offended me. There's just stuff that, like, I don't want to look at that. [laughs]

Taylor: Yeah, that's gross to look at. Well, I agree. And, well, I think sometimes—you know. Like, I'll turn off movies that I feel like I have—I have identified the goal of this type of comedy and I don't agree with it, you know. Like, I always think of—uh, gosh.

When I was young, I definitely pushed the limits of, like, how far down the extreme gore rabbit hole that I like. 'Cause I like extreme cinema. And, you know, I love chop-em-up violent films. But there's a series of films called

Guinea Pig movies, a Japanese, like—they're fake torture scenarios, basically.

And that's one of the first—that's when I met my limit, and I turned those off, and I never turned them back on again. 'Cause I was like, there's not a reason for the—the reason is the violence. It is just, "We're going to accurately show you violence against—" in this case it was a woman, which I think adds to the offensiveness. And it's not for any other reason, just to show you an accurate depiction of violence. I'm like, "Oh, I don't like that."

That's—the goal is not something I can agree with. And I don't think John Waters is just trying to show us... like, there's a—he's got a higher purpose behind it, even if it's under ten layers of dog poop and camp. There's a purpose to it that I can get behind.

Sydnee: Yeah. I think that's true, because I do think that there are, like... there are witty, funny, clever things said throughout the movie. Like, I think some of the dialogue is really enjoyable. I still found myself laughing, even after watching something really horrific. They say things that are funny, or still make the characters likable, even after, like, they've done something really awful. Like, I'll find myself laughing. It's clever, it's thoughtful, it's insightful at times. You know, like, it's not just a random assortment of gross-out imagery, right?

Taylor: Oh yeah.

Sydnee: Like, there's a—you know. Even if the narrative is loose, there is a—there's a thought behind it. It's clearly intentional. It's clearly done with intent.

Taylor: And there's a... there's sort of a—there's a love in the—like, it's stylish. There's lots of just, like, the design that's just really... I don't know. Something about that, like, a bunch of freaks that are self-identified, like, trash, and they're just living their weird little lives, and doing their weird little things. And, you know, wearing what they want to wear, and being who they want to be.

Again, it's not—wholesome is not a word that should be attached to this film, but there's something that's really—like, it's lovingly portrayed, I think. John Waters loves freaks, and this is him just sort of letting freaks, you know... let their freak flags fly. [laughs]

Sydnee: And I think as long as, like, whatever your freakiness is isn't hurting anyone, the truth is, like, why do we—why do we care? Why is it anybody else's business? You know, why can't you live out in your pink trailer in the middle of wherever they are?

Taylor: I would... [laughs] I would live in that pink trailer in a heartbeat. [laughs]

Sydnee: You know, and do your weird stuff. As long as you're not hurting other people. I think that's where things start to break down, and that's where the, you know, antagonists come in, is they're hurting other people. They're not just living their—they can be weird together with their red and blue hair. That's fine. But when they harm other people, then that's not fine. And that's—I think that's kind of the line we're drawing, but I don't know. It gets murky, 'cause there is murder, so I don't know.

Taylor: Yeah, but I mean, there's some sort of—there's a system of morality to Divine's actions, you know. Only bad people get shot and eaten. [laughs]

Sydnee: Yeah. It's... it is interesting, though. 'Cause I imagine—I imagine a lot of people were probably offended by this film.

Taylor: Yeah. It's banned—it's still banned in several countries.

Sydnee: Yeah. That doesn't surprise me. And I think what's interesting—that's what I was—I was really thinking about the word "offense." Like, am I offended? Can I be offended? And I think I associate the concept of offense with "I'm going to try and stop this thing from existing, or from being seen, or from being allowed to be seen." You know what I mean?

Like, that I'm gonna take some action. Which isn't necessarily inherent to the word, but I think that's the way we kind of see things, especially in this

country. If something offends me, I am going to speak out about it and take action to try and stop it. And I think that's where I—that's why I don't understand the word, you know, as it relates to me. I'm not offended by it. Maybe I don't—maybe I'm gonna turn my head during certain moments 'cause, like, eh, not for me. And I would be very careful about who I recommended this to.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: I certainly have people in my life that I would never suggest watch this movie. [laughs quietly] 'Cause I know they wouldn't want to see it, and I know that they would then say, "Why did you tell me to watch that?" [laughs quietly] Um, but I'm not... I would take no action to try to stop anyone else from engaging with it, you know?

Taylor: Well, I mean, I think it's important—and, you know, it often gets labeled as transgressive. And I think that there is something about... [sighs] especially in this day and age, I feel like queer art has lost its teeth. Like we're afraid to have them anymore. Where, you know, it's like—and part of it is living in a resurgence of fascism so, you know, people want to be safe.

But also even people that have the privilege to sort of be themselves, I think there's this very neutered version of queer that is the only one that's acceptable anymore. And man, sometimes I just love—this is why the old tomes still matter. It's like, it's—it's a little scary, and it's a little weird, and sometimes it makes you uncomfortable. And that doesn't make it bad, or evil, or something that should be stopped. That's just... that's just how life is sometimes. And I don't—I don't want to ever get too far away from that. Even if it's not the kind of art that I would make, I think this art is incredibly important to exist.

Sydnee: I think you're exactly right, Tey. And I do think what you're hitting on is the idea, like, what we as a society decide is gross, or scary, or wrong, or, you know, bad in some way, is—it's relative, and it shifts, and it's a moving target, right? And I think that if you are part of, you know, a subset of the population that has been demonized, that has been made to feel like you're bad, or gross, or wrong, or something. I think it's really natural, then, to start to look at other things that we say are bad, or gross, or wrong, or,

you know, evil in some way. And question, is that right? Is it? Is it? I mean, I think that's a fair question. And sometimes the answer is, "Oh, yeah, no, that's still evil. [laughs] No, that's still—we can all, whatever our sexuality is, we can all agree that that's gross."

But then sometimes you go, "I don't know." Who else have we tossed out? Who else have we, you know, locked the door on as a society that it wasn't fair?

So I think it's good to think that way, and I think you can only think that way, really, if you've been on the outside. I mean, that has to, um, explain the queer community's love for cryptids, right?

Taylor: Oh yeah. Well, I mean, I... I mean, quite, like, honestly, like, the love for spooky things, for monsters—I mean, that's the only play we saw ourselves for decades, for centuries, was all of the bad guys, all of the monsters.

And this film, in a really messed up way, explores that line that you were talking about. Where it's like, yeah, you be a little freak. Be a little weirdo. And that does not make you evil or bad. There are these characters in this film that are obviously—their actions make them bad people. And then there are the characters that are just freaks by nature of their being, and they're not bad people.

And, I mean, again, they're bad—you can't—don't eat people, don't murder 'em. Not that. But, like, you know, that's in the—the—the heightened reality of this movie that is, again, very cartoonish.

Sydney: No, those are—and those are—but, I mean, I think that asking yourself if you have a knee jerk reaction to something or someone that is, "Ooh, that's bad." Challenging yourself and saying, "Now, is it? Why do I think that?"

And, like, I don't think that's a bad impulse. Because, I think, especially right now, we are being told that so many people are bad. Whether it's because of their, you know, who they love, or what their gender is, or what country they came from.

Taylor: [simultaneously] Where they're from.

Sydnee: Yeah. You know, what language they speak, what religion they practice. We're being told so many people are bad. And that—and these are lies that we're being told. And so to constantly challenge that idea is not a terrible message, even if it's told in hyperbole. Obviously, yes, cannibalism is bad. Don't eat people, obviously.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: You know. Violence and sexual assault, these are terrible things. Don't—these are awful, clearly. But being weird and loving the egg man is not really a bad thing.

Taylor: Who wouldn't love the egg man? He brings you eggs. Well, not that's—you know, and like you were saying, like, people that are outside of society have that perspective. Like, it's not—I don't need everyone in the world to align with my beliefs. I just need us all to have space to have our own beliefs, you know. We all need to have our own little pink trailer that we can be freaks in.

I don't need to—I don't need to believe in the same things as you believe. And as much as that is something that, you know, you can obviously put on... I don't even like talking in right and left. I don't think those are really useful. I think those are just sort of divisive. But just as an organization, like, that's always ascribed to the right, is they want to force their way of thinking on other people.

But then again, like, I see the same thing in, like, in—in people in my own supposed community. Where it's like, I don't have to think the same way that you think. That's what we're supposed to do. That's what queer liberation is, is like, I don't have to think the way you think. I just need to allow you space to think whatever you want, and I think whatever I want, and we respect that.

And I don't know when we lost the plot, and now we think we all have to agree the same things. We all have to have the same dogmatic systems of belief. And, uh...

Sydnee: Which is—because that's exactly what we, you know, those of us on the left have criticized the right for a long time. Is that they, you know, they do treat, like, America as a monolith. It sounds like this, and looks like this, and believes like this, and works like this, and that's not who we are. That's not what we should be. And so why would we want to create a new—[laughs quietly] a new homogeny?

Outside of acceptance. I mean, that is the only thing. Accepting others is really the only—that's the only homogeny I'm in favor of.

Taylor: Yeah. Well, and that's—I think that there—you could suss out a far more, like—a far less confrontational version of this film, where you draw those lines a lot cleaner. Like, "Oh, these people are just—they're lovable weirdos, and they're not actually evil."

And, you know, there's a conversation to have here about, like, the people we think are evil just because of, you know, they're gay or they're whatever, versus the people that are actually evil. But I kind of love that the movie doesn't do that. Like, it's not interested in being that digestible. Like, there's—again, that's part of the defense mechanism. Like, I don't want to be that digestible. I don't want to make myself... incredibly comprehensible to you, because I don't have to. It's not my job to.

Sydnee: Right. And, I mean, honesty, like—I mean, I think it feels like the difference, to me, between, like, fashion that you're actually going to buy in a store and fashion that you see on a runway. It's kind of like, you know, there's a lot of couture that the idea is not that somebody's gonna put this on their human body—I mean, maybe some celebrity or model will.

But for the most part, it's like a concept. It's an idea. It's moving the conversation in a new direction. And I feel like that's more what this film is trying to do, as opposed to, like, literally send you a message. It's a conversation, and it's a direction, and it's going to be harder to parse, and

it's going to open up a lot of different avenues that you could go. But you're not just going to take it on as a new life philosophy. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: No. Well, I mean, even just, like, the shocking imagery in it. Like, I don't think it's shocking for shock's sake. But I do think it's, like, you know—like, I remember—and I don't know, this is... you probably have some sort of similar mem—I'm sure everybody has a moment like this that is any sort of a free thinker.

I was probably, like, 12 or 13. [laughs] And I remember looking up, like, dirty anime fan fiction, and feeling like "I'm a bad person for this." Like—and it was gay. Like, dirty, gay anime fan fiction when I was, like, 13 years old on, like, AOL, like, searching for it. And, like, "Oh, this makes me a bad person."

And I remember having the thought, like, "There's nothing that I could think or read that makes me evil. Like, that's not... nothing that goes on in my brain—I can think of whatever I want in my brain. And it doesn't—no one has to know, and it doesn't make me a bad person." And it's like, all of those walls that I had up in my mind, like "Don't think about that! That's evil. Don't think about that! That's bad."

It's like they all fell down, and I felt like I could just run around freely in my brain. Like, "Ha ha! I can think whatever I want! Ha ha!" [laughs] Like, and I think seeing shocking things sometimes does that. Like, yeah, I saw that. That's weird. That doesn't... you know, it didn't change the world. It didn't make the, I don't know, the—the... what are the—the seals break and Revelations begin.

Sydney: But I do think that's an—I think that what you're talking about is something the unfortunately a lot of people don't seem to have done. Which is to unravel that in their own brain, is to break down those walls in their own brain. And they are still so afraid of engaging with these thoughts that they want to limit everyone else's ability to engage with those thoughts.

And, I mean, I—I don't know. I think that's... that's not really the core of fascism, but it is certainly a lot of, like, religious oppression.

Taylor: Well, and I think that—I think that kind of in a weird way loops back to our initial conversation about AI. Like, if we limit thought, if we limit... like, engagement with our own souls—'cause art exists in a weird space that if you could say in words, then it's not art.

Like, it needs to exist in some sort of weird gray area that moves something in you that you can't move in conventional ways. And if we lose those spaces, then we lose the necessity for art that engages with those spaces. And then, yeah, you know... [laughs quietly] AI... pretty lady, big boobs, is fine. "Oh, that's nice. I can hang that on my wall."

Sydnee: Well, and I mean, it—you know. I think that we owe it to ourselves, with our mortal human existences, to think about all the things we can, and to explore all the ideas within ourselves that we can. I don't know why we would want to limit that. That doesn't mean you do all those things. [laughs quietly]

There are many of those things you shouldn't do. Don't do. But to think through all those things within yourself and make up your own mind, um, is a really important thing to do. And I don't know why we'd ever want to limit that.

Taylor: No. And I mean, you know—and again, it's not—well, some of the events in this film do really happen. They make a point of saying that. Divine absolutely does consume what you think she consumes at the end of the film. [laughs] The iconic, controversial—probably the most controversial scene in it, because it is real. But—

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Beyond that, it is fiction. And, I mean, like, I don't want people to be chopped up in little pieces, but boy, I love watching Jason Voorhees chop people up in little pieces. It's fun. It's weird. It's scary. Like, that's—art should have those, you know, those feelings. [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, Tey, I did appreciate watching this. I did.

Taylor: I appreciate you for watching it. [laughs]

Sydnee: I'm glad I engaged with it. I'm glad that I engaged with it. I mean, it's—you know, it's interesting. It was very thought-provoking. Justin and I talked about it a long time afterwards.

Taylor: Well, I promise they get easier from here. [laughs]

Sydnee: And I'm sure we will continue to. Well, that's what I was gonna say. Let's do something for our audience that maybe doesn't want to engage with content like that. What John Waters movie next would be a little easier?

Taylor: Oh, we're gonna go to Cry-Baby. A lot of people have seen it. It's definitely a departure from, uh, from Pink Flamingos. It's one of the more commercially successful ones.

Sydnee: Well, we will watch that next. And then, again, I think if you're up for that kind of content, it's a really—I mean, it is very evocative. It's a good—there's a lot of conversation that, you know, can be started from Pink Flamingos. If that's not necessarily something you want to engage with, that's understandable. Maybe skip this one.

Taylor: Yeah. Well, yeah. If shock cinema is not your thing, this is not your thing. [laughs]

Sydnee: 'Cause it is. It is shocking. Yeah. I wasn't offended, I was shocked. That's fair.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, but thank you, Tey. I appreciate it. I had never engaged with that, so I like to know what else is out there in the world.

Taylor: Thank you for watching it.

Sydnee: Listeners, thank you. You can go to Maximumfun.org and listen to all kinds of great podcasts that you would enjoy. Um, you should check out Taylor's drag. It's on your socials.

Taylor: I mean, [laughs] it is. It is.

Sydnee: It's really good.

Taylor: I don't—I am not, like, booked and busy, you know. So, hopefully I'll get some more shows, but you know, you can see some pictures from it.

Sydnee: You can see some pictures. It's really good. Um, and you can email us at stillbuffering@maximumfun.org, and thank you to The Nouvellas for our theme song, Baby You Change Your Mind.

Taylor: This has been Still Buffering, your cross-generational guide to the culture that made us.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: And I'm Taylor Smirl.

Sydnee: I'm still buffering...

Taylor: And I am too.

[theme music plays]

Sydnee: Yeah, I'm glad I waited till after the kids went to bed.

Taylor: [laughs] I'm so glad.

Sydnee: I didn't know what we were in for, and I was like, "We're watching a movie called Pink Flamingos." And Charlie was like, "Ooh, I love pink flamingos."

Taylor: Aww. Yeah... I—

Sydnee: So glad!

Taylor: I thought—

Sydnee: They were in bed.

Taylor: I thought of texting you when I was watching it. Like, "I should—I'm sure she knows. I'm sure she knows that this is not kid-friendly."

Sydnee: No clue!

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: No clue.

[chord]

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